DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 619 EM 008 866

AUTHOR	Anderson, James A.
TITLE	An Analysis of the Methodologies Used in Media Credibility Study Or: "The Medium They Believe Depends on the Question You Ask."
INSTITUTION	Ohio Univ., Athens.
PUB DATE	Apr 71
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference (Phoenix, Arizona, April 22-24, 1971)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Audiences, Intermode Differences, *Mass Media, *Media Research, Newspapers, Radio, Research Criteria, *Research Design, *Research Methodology, *Surveys, Television, Television Research, Television Surveys, Use Studies

ABSTRACT

Past studies of media credibility have yielded contradictory results. In some research, television has the most credibility, while in others, radio or newspapers have the most. A probable reason for this is the way survey questions are phrased. In asking for a "major source of news," some questions focus on the "most likely medium" for news in general, others on the "most likely medium" for a specific news story, and others ask for the responder's "most frequent choice" of medium. Because these phrases vary and because questions are offered in a forced-choice format, inconsistent results occur. A multivariate approach to the questions of credibility and usage is, therefore, preferable. The approach should be concerned not only with the characteristics of the individual, but also with the characteristics of the information presented and the particular characteristics of the specific newspapers, television stations, or radio stations which the individual uses as the basis for his general judgments concerning newspapers, television and radio. (JK)

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE METHODOLOGIES USED IN MEDIA CREDIBILITY STUDIES OR:

"The medium they believe depends on the question you ask."

by

James A. Anderson

Broadcast Research Center

Ohio University

Athens, Ohio 45701

International Communication Association

Phoenix, Arizona

April 22 - 24, 1971

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In many ways studies on media credibility appear to have fallen victim to competition among advocates of various media and between "professional" and academic research. This paper is a plea for an end to the destructive aspects of that competition and a call for a multidimensional approach to the study of credibility.

Perhaps the best known and most criticized studies have been the Roper surveys (1969). Funded by the Television Information Office and conducted by a professional institute, the studies have asked three major questions for over a decade. The questions, referring to use, believability, and desirability, have shown television increasing in all three areas generally at the expense of newspapers.

Westley and Severin (1964) on the other hand report a study funded by the Inland Daily Press Association which found 95 per cent of their respondents believed newspapers were doing a "good" or "very good" job.

Carter and Greenberg (1965) in their report given before the AEJ Convention and published in Journalism Quarterly attacked the Roper Studies calling them "of dubious methodological purity and biased against newspapers". In the end Carter and Greenberg found the Roper questions biased toward both television and newspapers. As for methodological purity its definition remained at large.

In more recent criticism Stone (1969) attacked the ambiguity of Roper's questions and the tendency for others to interpret Roper's multiple responses as responses to exclusive and exhaustive categories.

Without at all negating the contribution of the Roper studies and the

subsequent criticism, they do appear to have limited utility in defining the perameters of message credibility for each medium.

In the first place, such studies generally ignore Klapper's (1960) vintage "nexus of mediating factors", and approach credibility as if each medium had a direct monolithic effect. The simplistic notion that one medium per se consistently and without regard to the specific topic, method of presentation, competing, or complimentary information will maintain a credibility or usage edge cannot be supported. Methodologically this lack of support is easily demonstrated.

Consider if you will the notion of "major source of news". Here are eight ways of asking that question:

> When you want to find out about local events or affairs, which of the choices is most like you?
>
> When you want to find out about affairs or events in the State of Ohio which of the choices is most like you?
>
> When you want to find out about world events or affairs which of the choices is most like you?
>
> If you wanted to get some information about a new change in the Russian government, which of the choices is most like you?
>
> If you wanted to get some information about a prison riot at the Ohio Reformatory, which of the choices is most like you?
>
> If you wanted to get some information about a fire at the telephone company, which of the choices is most like you?
>
> How do you find out what's going on in the world--in Ohio and the rest of the country? Do you get your news about what's going on in the world from television or radio or talking to people or newspapers?
>
> How do you find out what's going on locally--around this area? Do you get most of your local news from newspapers or radio or television or talking to people?

As can be seen, the questions are in three sets. The first set asks for the

"most likely medium" generally; the second the "most likely medium" for a specific example; and the third the "most frequent" choice of the medium.

Each of the questions is a forced choice question with radio, television. and newspapers being potential answers. Within each set the questions vary one from another on the basis of the subject matter of the news presentation. Each of the questions was asked of 575 respondents selected at random from urban and non-urban locals. The questions were included in a larger questionnaire administered by personal interview. If there was a monolithic effect of usage, and by implication of credibility, one would expect the same medium to be the highest choice for each question. Of course, this result does not occur.

Looking at just the responses to the local question, the percentages of positive responses array themselves according to Table 1.

TABLE 1

	Print	Radio	TV
Most likely Source	66	23	11
Hypothetical Event*	28	48	16
Most frequent Source*	49	30	9

*Percentages do not add as the additional foil of "people" was available

Table 1--Percentage of responses for each medium from each question on local news.

As can be seen from Table 1, the percentages vary widely from question to question but television is always lowest. Newspapers are highest in two of three cases. Radio "wins" in one.

With the state news questions the response pattern changes. Table 2 presents the percentages for the two questions referring to state news.

TABLE 2

	Print	Radio	TV
Most Likely	39	16	45
Hypothetical*	25	17	55

*Percentages do not add as the additional foil of "people" was available

Table 2--Percentage of responses for each medium from questions relating to state news.

Again the differences between the state news questions are substantial. More importantly the differences between the prime source of state and local news within question types strongly demonstrate a topic effect.

Finally, the percentages for response to the three world news questions are posted in Table 3.

TABLE 3

	Print	Radio	TV
Most Likely	26	7	66
Hypothetical*	35	10	51
Most Frequent*	21	16	61

*Percentages do not add as the additional foil of "people" was available

Table 3--Percentages of responses for each medium from questions relating to world news.

The percentages in Table 3 all show television achieving the highest per cent, newspapers second, and radio third. Again the percentages vary from question

to question with the hypothetical example showing the widest deviance.

It is interesting to note that the response to these forced choice questions closely approximate the responses for television with the Roper multiple answer questions. Newspaper and radio, however, receive higher percentages under the Roper methodology.

The effect of topics and methodology can be dramatically shown by comparing the responses to newspapers over the three topic areas of local, state, and world news for the "most likely" and hypothetical example questions. Table 4 presents these percentages.

TABLE 4

	Local	State	World
Most Likely	66	39	26
Hypothetical	28	25	35

Table 4--Percentages of positive responses for newspapers in two sets of questions relating to local, state, and world news.

In the "most likely" question, newspapers received the highest percentage of responses under the local news topic condition, then, consistently lost responses going through the state and world topic conditions. In the hypothetical example question, the percentages are about the same for local and state, but increase noticeably for the world news condition.

What does it all mean? It means that we can very likely write questions concerning credibility and certainly can write questions concerning prime source which will show whatever medium one desires in the lead. It also means that a multivariate approach to the question of credibility and usage

must be employed. Such approaches have appeared in the literature.

One of the earliest multivariate studies was conducted by Westley and Severin (1964). Their study sharply illustrates the multi-faceted complexity of the credibility topic. They found several socio-economic and demographic variables which identified different levels of credibility for different media in respondents.

Studies by Greenberg (1966), Anast (1966), Greenberg and Kumata (1968), Bishop (1969), and Starck (1969) have all used the approach of identifying different classes of respondents. Most of these studies have found variables which significantly relate to the credibility score elicited for each medium tested. The results, however, have not been consistent from study to study. Variables shown to have predictive power in one study may fail to appear as useful in another. Perhaps one reason for this lack of consistency is that analysis according to respondent characteristics is only one piece in the jigsaw of credibility. Other pieces are: a) The specific subject matter of interest presented by the media and attended to by the individual. It is quite possible that individuals seek and believe in information differentially according to the nature of that information. b) The uses projected by the individual for the information are likely to affect which medium is chosen. c) As Stone and Chaffee (1970) have shown, the interpersonal network in which the individual is operating is a significant factor. d) The range of mass media available to the individual must affect his choices. Surely a multi-media, multi-channel environment has a different effect from a single newspaper, single channel environment. Lemert (1970) has even suggested that the difference between the East coast and the West coast may affect credibility.

e) Chang and Lemert (1968) have demonstrated that the perceived characteristics of the media which are available interact with the credibility. f) The particular content mix chosen by the media available to the individual must affect his responses to these media. In short we must not only be concerned with the characteristics of the individual but also the characteristics of the information presented and the particular characteristics of the specific newspapers, television stations and radio stations which the individual uses as the basis for his judgments concerning newspapers, television and radio in general. It is this author's contention that sensible delineations of media credibility and usage will only occur when studies account for the activity of these variables. The studies will need to be complex--perhaps sophisticated is a better word. But as a result the studies will be closer to reality.

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